

Lines at soup kitchens replace tourism in Peru's Cusco department

CUSCO, Peru (CNS) – People begin standing in line early in Cusco, in Peru's mountains, but instead of tourists waiting to board a train to the country's fabled Machu Picchu ruins, the lines today are local residents picking up a sack of food or, a little later in the morning, a hot meal.

The coronavirus pandemic has been harsh in Peru, and Cusco – the center of the country's thriving tourism business – has been particularly hard hit. Church leaders say hunger and related problems, like child anemia, are on the upswing, and they are responding by opening soup kitchens to meet needs.

“The problem of hunger here has increased noticeably. Cusco lives on tourism, so income is down substantially because of the high level of unemployment,” said Father Jorge Carrasco, a diocesan priest at Our Lady of Sorrows Parish.

Father Carrasco opened a soup kitchen in the parish in April, a month into the pandemic lockdown in Peru, and today serves around 100 people. He lends a hand to nine similar projects run by residents in the parish.

The budget for the soup kitchen ends in January, and Father Carrasco said while he is scraping together money to keep it going, volunteers who have been cooking also need to get back to paid work, which would leave him in a lurch.

“We will try to keep going, because there is need, but I am not sure how at this time,” he said. Caritas Peru, the local branch of the international Catholic relief agency, has been helping Father Carrasco's soup kitchen and similar projects in rural parishes, but demand is far greater than it can meet.

The Peruvian government's statistics institute reported that the hospitality sector was off by 44% in October compared to a year ago, which is huge but nowhere near as steep as the 95% contraction in April. Overall, Peru's economy is forecast to shrink nearly 13% this year, according to the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Begoña Gutiérrez, a project developer at Caritas, said that while the pandemic has eased nationally, the economic problems have gotten worse in parts of Cusco department, especially rural areas. She said the pandemic has coincided with a lack of rain that has hurt family agriculture, the disappearance of tourism and smaller public works budgets that means fewer jobs.

Parish-based soup kitchens have been opening in recent months, with the most recent two opening in November.

"Soup kitchens are being opened in communities that just now feeling a greater impact. Parish priests can see the needs of people, who are not eating like they did before the crisis," she said.